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ON PAGE

A-14

NEW YORK TIMES

25 APRIL 1983

The Ferment Over Central America

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 24 — The House Intelligence Committee is normally a discreet, disciplined group that follows the lead of its chairman, Representative Edward P. Boland, a veteran Massachusetts Democrat not known for rocking many boats.

That routine was shattered two weeks ago when one member of the committee, Representative Wyche Fowler Jr., Democrat of Georgia, returned from a trip to Central America and said at a news conference that the Reagan Administration's covert operations in the area did not fully comply with the law.

Mr. Boland, who was traveling in China at the time, was reportedly incensed when he learned about Mr. Fowler's comments. But by last week, after reviewing the covert activities and learning that many other members of the committee and the House shared Mr. Fowler's views, Mr. Boland himself broke with the panel's tradition of discretion. He publicly announced that "the evidence is very strong" that the Administration has violated the law by providing covert aid to Nicaraguan rebels.

Like a Solar Eclipse

The ferment within the Intelligence Committee indicates a general climate of unrest in the Government spawned by the Administration's policy on Central America. Like a solar eclipse that temporarily disrupts the normal rhythms of life, the deepening American involvement in Central America has shaken Washington, producing undercurrents of dissent and rebellion that echo the initial mis 1960's phases of opposition to the Vietnam War.

The effect is most pronounced in Congress, with national polls showing little public support for United States involvement in Central America. Congress has resisted the Administration's efforts to increase military aid to El Salvador and raised objections to the covert activities, including the training and arming of anti-Government forces in Nicaragua.

The Reagan Administration considers the problems so severe that the White House, in an unusual step, asked Congressional leaders to schedule a special joint session of Congress so President Reagan could talk about Central America. Congress normally meets in joint session once a year to hear the President's State of the Union Message or in periods of national emergency. Mr. Reagan's speech is scheduled for Wednesday.

Some Unexpected Alliances

Some of the Congressional opposition to Mr. Reagan's policy on Central America has been predictably parti-

san, with Democrats leading the attack. But in both the Senate and House, the issue has forged some unexpected alliances between Republicans and Democrats.

In the Senate, for example, the Republican-controlled Foreign Relations Committee, for the first time in memory, asserted jurisdiction over an appropriations matter when members of both parties joined in sending a letter to the State Department recommending that the Administration reduce by half its request for \$60 million in emergency military aid to El Salvador.

In the Senate Intelligence Committee, opposition to covert activities in Central America is shared among Republicans and Democrats, and has created friction between many members of the panel and its chairman, Senator Barry Goldwater, Republican of Arizona.

Mr. Goldwater stunned many of his colleagues last week when he declared that there was no reason to question the legality of the covert operations. "Barry is becoming increasingly isolated," one member of the committee said later.

In the House, the driving force behind opposition to the Administration's policy is a group of 40 to 50 members, most young and Democratic, who have worked behind the scenes during the last 18 months to persuade their colleagues that current policies are dangerously misguided.

Some leaders of this group have an institutional responsibility to deal with foreign affairs, including Representative Michael D. Barnes, Democrat of Maryland, who is chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs. Others, like Representative George Miller, Democrat of California, say they have joined the opposition because they fear the Administration's policies will lead to an ever-increasing American involvement in Central America.

The concerns of Mr. Barnes, Mr. Miller and others is cited by members of the House Intelligence Committee as one reason that Mr. Fowler and Mr. Boland spoke out against the activities. "This was a case when the membership led and the leaders followed," said one member of the committee.

Partly because of anxiety that the House leadership will not push the issue, Mr. Miller and others advocate calling the entire House into a rare closed session to review the covert activities and consider taking action to cut off funding for them. Some House members said that Mr. Boland's criticism of the Administration last week

was an effort by the leadership to head off such a session. Senator Christopher J. Dodd, the Connecticut Democrat who is a leading critic of the Administration's policy, has proposed that the Senate also hold a secret session.

Calls From C.I.A. Employees

The stirrings are not confined to Congress. Officials within the Administration who oppose the policy toward Central America started leaking national security documents to reporters last year. And the pace of unauthorized disclosures has quickened in recent months despite new regulations that increase the penalty for releasing classified information.

There is even unrest at the Central Intelligence Agency, the organization responsible for conducting the covert operations. A reporter recently received calls from several employees of the agency who expressed concern about the increased level of covert operations.

The employees reported growing fears in the agency's ranks that the debate about covert operations could hurt the efforts to re-establish ties with the academic community and might, if Congressional opposition escalates, undermine support in Congress for the C.I.A.'s rapidly increasing budget.

In the case of opposition to the Vietnam War, the dissent and rebellion that eventually developed became major forces in the nation's life and contributed to fundamental changes in the institutions of Government. For example, the rigid seniority system in Congress, was, in part, a casualty of the ferment.

No one involved with the current opposition has suggested that it will have such a lasting impact. But ultimately, they say, the degree of unrest will be in direct proportion to the level of United States involvement in Central America.